

# Age Variation in Mating Strategies and Mate Preferences: Beliefs versus Reality

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## Background

- Research on human mating has revealed both sex similarities and differences.
- Prominent similarities include a shared emphasis on finding a long-term partner, particularly one that is kindness and loving.
- Prominent sex differences include men's greater emphasis on physical attractiveness and willingness to engage in short-term mating.
- Next to nothing, however, is known about change over time in individuals' mating strategies and mate preferences
- In Study 1, we assessed emerging adults' beliefs about how their peers' mate preferences and desires might change over time
- In Studies 2 and 3, we assessed whether actual age variation in mating desires mirrors those beliefs.

## Study 1: Beliefs About Age Variation in Mating Strategies and Partner Preferences

- Method**
- Sample included 63 women and 40 men between 18 and 25 years of age
  - Participants provided open-ended responses to two questions:
    - How, if at all, do you think young men's and young women's romantic relationship desires (that is, what they want out of a romantic relationship) change as they develop from incoming college freshmen to graduating seniors?
    - How, if at all, do you think young men's and young women's partner preferences (that is, what they want in a romantic partner) change as they develop from incoming college freshmen to graduating seniors?

Belief	Sample Response	% of Men	% of Women
Increased long-term mindset	"I think that as freshmen most people want just a relationship, and by the time they are seniors they are starting to look for someone who could be their 'life partner'."	83%	83%
Decreased short-term mindset	"I think as a freshman, most desires are for the here and now. I've noticed that most seniors are looking for more than sexual gratification like a younger student. I think they want more emotions and intimacy than one night stands."	38%	22%
Increased emphasis on personality	"I think graduating seniors look for intellectual qualities rather than appearance qualities."	60%	49%
Decreased emphasis on appearance	"As a freshman, we are looking for the 'hottest' person to 'hook up' with and as seniors, I think that goes out the window and internal beauty becomes so much more attractive."	38%	27%

## Discussion

- Participants' responses in Study 1 portrayed a common assumption that young adults become more long-term oriented and less short-term oriented, and more focused on internal characteristics and less focused on external appearances, as they proceed through college.
- Studies 2 and 3, however, documented no age variation in 18-26 year olds' interest in long-term mating or short-term mating. Study 3 did document a lowered emphasis on physical attractiveness among 22-26 year olds relative to 18-19 year olds. The sex differences in short-term mating desires and emphasis on attractiveness were large within each age group.
- We are now designing a 4-year prospective investigation of change and stability in mating desires during college.

## Method

- Study 2**
  - 170 women and 118 men between 18 and 25 years of age
  - Participants completed a survey in which they were allotted 50 "mate dollars" to their idea of the ideal romantic partner.
  - Each participant allotted 0 to 10 dollars for each of the following characteristics: ambition, desire for children, emotional stability, faithfulness, intelligence, physical attractiveness, potential for financial success, sense of humor, similar values, and social popularity.
  - Participants completed the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI), a measure of attitudes toward and experience with casual sex.
- Study 3**
  - 213 women and 94 men between 18 and 26 years of age
  - As in Study 2, participants allotted 50 mate dollars to design their ideal romantic partner.
  - Participants completed Jackson and Kirkpatrick's (2007) measure of short-term and long-term mating orientation.

## Studies 2 and 3: Actual Age Variation in Mating Strategies and Partner Preferences

### Results

- Study 2**
  - At every age, both men and women allotted more mate dollars to *faithfulness* than to any other characteristic. They also tended to allot the fewest dollars to *social popularity*.
  - Age was not associated with men's or women's recent number of sex partners (bottom left corner), or with their foreseen future number of sex partners (bottom, second from left).
  - Age was not associated with the number of mate dollars allotted to mate characteristics, for either sex.
- Study 3**
  - As in Study 2, age was not associated with either short-term mating desires (bottom right) or long-term mating desires (bottom, second from right), for either men or women.
  - For both men and women, increasing age was associated with less emphasis on attractiveness; for women, age also predicted greater emphasis on intelligence (see figures in top row), as well as on emotional stability.

